

VZCZCXRO9761
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHAK #0828/01 1001330
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 101330Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1650
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC//J-3/J-5//
RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEUITH/TLO ANKARA TU
RUEHAK/USDAO ANKARA TU
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000828

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/10/2027

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: TROUBLED GOVERNMENT-MEDIA RELATIONS

REF: ANKARA 778

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4(b),
(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Secularist contacts assert that Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government pressures an important voice in society -- the media -- through a variety of means. Such charges have been leveled against previous governments, but AKP's concentrated hold on power makes it more susceptible to accusations of coercion and inappropriate influence. For its part, AKP claims to be at the mercy of a hostile, unethical press, influenced by the traditional secular state apparatus. The reality of Turkey's rough-and-tumble nexus of government, media, and the state is closer to a Mexican standoff, with every player on the defensive, ready to attack. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Turkey's diverse and lively media are at times unreliable, regularly take the brunt of freedom of speech-related prosecutions and, some argue, are also the target of AKP government efforts to silence or punish them for trying to unmask AKP corruption or scandals. An additional factor is that the media are owned by a relatively small group of holding companies, most of which have other financial interests that can render them beholden to the government in office. Similar charges have been leveled at previous governments, but AKP's concentrated hold on power and the staunchly secular leanings of much of the press make this situation unique. As with all Turkish conspiracy theories, flying accusations contain grains of truth, considerable circumstantial evidence, and a dose of imagination.

Audits, Warnings, and Self-Censorship

13. (C) Several contacts have accused AKP government officials of targeting media entities in retaliation for reporting on corruption allegations or other anti-AKP stories. According to Contemporary Journalists Association Chairman Ahmet Abakay, gasoline retailer Petrol Ofisi (PO), owned by media mogul Aydin Dogan, came under Finance Ministry investigation last fall after the Dogan group published anti-government articles. Press coverage indicated that PO owed the government 2.7 billion YTL (USD 1.95 billion), but in December was fined just 3.38 million YTL (USD 2.37 million). Contacts claim the Finance Ministry is using the case as leverage to keep the Dogan group's media in line.

14. (C) Prominent Dogan group columnist Sukru Kucuksahin (Hurriyet) accused the Finance Ministry of pressuring the media by focusing on the companies owned by media groups, but going after individuals as well. His list of AKP tactics included denying its critics access to officials; opening lawsuits; and issuing complaints against individual writers to both editors and prosecutors alike. The government complains about him and his colleagues Emin Colasan and Bekir Coskun on a daily basis, he reported. Although the paper generally backs them up, in part because their bylines sell papers, Kucuksahin (please protect) reports that at least three of his columns -- concerning Finance Minister Unakitan, whom Kucuksahin describes as "one of the dirtiest members of this government" -- were pulled, in an exercise of institutional self-censorship.

Two Sides to Every Story... and both have holes

15. (C) The January 9 Finance Ministry investigation into KanalTurk television station and station owner Tuncay Ozkan is another case in point. Associated commentators Cuneyt Arcayurek and Mine Kirkkanat are also under Finance Ministry investigation. At a recent press freedom conference, Ozkan claimed that the Finance Ministry's pressure is a result of the station's anti-government reporting. Media members employed elsewhere told us they agree with that perception. They point to the Finance Ministry's apparently selective interest -- including a lack of interest in so-called Islamist media -- as further circumstantial evidence of politicization of investigative resources. However, the station's murky financial origins undermine Ozkan's

ANKARA 00000828 002 OF 003

persecution claims: Ozkan claims he started the leftist-nationalist station using \$3 million he made as a journalist, an improbably high sum for a journalist that has led others to suggest that Turkish intelligence is the real owner behind Ozkan.

16. (C) Some also accuse the government of using a lack of clear regulation as a tool to influence the media. According to contacts, in the 1990s companies popped up out of nowhere to establish television stations. Of at least 100 television stations, with new ones established each year, only state-run TRT is legally licensed; the government has yet to issue formal broadcast regulations. Dean of the Communications Faculty at Gazi University, Korkmaz Alemdar, contends that to avoid run-ins with the government over their quasi-legal status, stations broadcast government-friendly transmissions. Governments keep the airwaves in legal limbo to ensure television station owners remain cooperative, he says. Whether the parliament will finally fill the void, which has existed since 1993, remains to be seen.

17. (C) In a recent charge of political interference, Umur Yumuturug, deputy chairman of minor opposition Genc Parti, complained that Genc had signed a contract and paid for 27 minutes of ticker advertising during a late March soccer match between Turkey and Greece. After government spokesman and Justice Minister Cicek weighed in with the media company ATV, Yumuturug said the station pulled the Genc Party ads three hours before game time. Genc Party may pursue legal action for breach of contract, but the party lost a prime opportunity to advertise to a key audience. For its part, ATV claimed Genc wanted nothing less than a three-hour block and rejected smaller blocks. Yumuturug was adamant the cancellation was a result of direct government intervention.

18. (C) A government takeover last week of the country's second largest media holding (reftel), including Sabah daily and ATV television, by contrast, appears legitimately based on its owner's fraudulent activities. Both outlets continue operations, and Sabah's editor-in-chief has kept his job. But initial coverage of the takeover reflected

media-government tensions. Reporting by major papers was strictly factual, with virtually all columnists steering away from what opposition politicians were jumping on: the potential for politicizing the press in an election year. Kucuksahin acknowledges the legal basis for the takeover but emphasizes that a large media group is now under the government's control. On the columnists' lack of coverage, he says pointedly, "You know why they are silent." Three days after the takeover, Bekir Coskun of Hurriyet, without directly mentioning Sabah or the takeover, authored a bitter column arguing that "there's no democracy with this media.... Is 'free' media possible when fear has permeated the corridors, the rooms, the curtains, the sills, the air?... How can media unable to defend its own freedom be useful to democracy?"

Look into the Mirror, Says AKP

¶9. (C) If (at least some of) the media are intimidated by AKP, AKP also claims to fear the media. AKP deputy chairman in charge of media affairs, Edibe Sozen, blames the near monopoly hold of Turkey's media barons. She says this concentration of power must change because the media play such an important role in shaping society. Media moguls, Dogan group first among them, see media as capital that furthers their commercial interests; they place no value on the role of social capital generated by their publications and broadcasts, according to Sozen. Although Sozen believes AKP could change this situation by amending the laws to compel shared ownership, the government cannot risk creating enemies: "No one wants to take on Dogan." In a media environment devoid of ethics, she says, facts become irrelevant; the media get personal and take revenge.

¶10. (C) Not surprisingly, Sozen disagrees that the government exerts too much influence on the media. A former professor of communications who reads modern philosophy and does not wear a headscarf, she characterizes the politicians in her party as "more local, non-modern, and non-secular." These are not people who want to engage in a struggle with the media, Sozen said. Indeed, she worries about influence from

ANKARA 00000828 003 OF 003

a different direction. When columnists or newspaper surveys ask, "If Erdogan seeks the presidency, will there be a coup?" she believes they are serving as a vehicle for the state. She describes such questions as risky, irresponsible, and anti-democratic because of their potential to shape opinion and frame expectations.

Facts Remain Elusive, Motives Suspect

¶11. (C) Media relationships are sometimes murky, but clear political connections exist. Korkmaz Alemdar focuses on the interaction between government and media, particularly the opacity of government-granted privileges or commercial reciprocity. Because the staunchly secular daily Cumhuriyet carries little advertising, some allege the Turkish General Staff (TGS) and opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) indirectly finance the small circulation paper. No documents confirm such a relationship, but as one observer stated, "everybody knows it is this way." Many media owners admit to being politicized players; KanalTurk television owner Tuncay Ozkan, for example, openly stated at a rally that KanalTurk supports the CHP. Yeni Safak's connection to the ruling AKP is clear, as is Zaman's to the Gulenists. In addition, media groups often exist to serve the commercial interests of companies that seek government contracts or are dependent on government regulatory decisions, with no clear separation of editorial content or disclosure. In keeping with Turkey's tradition of patronage, Erdogan advisor Cuneyt Zapsu and Deputy PM Gul reportedly heavily influenced the placement of

key news directors at FOX TV.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Turkey's lively media gives the appearance of an open, democratic marketplace of ideas, but the push and pull of power relations, ownership concentration, and lack of transparency are a challenging combination for a free and open press. In government-media relations, few if any are clean, and shady dealings have become virtually the norm: the chief advisor to Ankara's mayor told us he greased a few palms to stop negative press from three journalists and hasn't heard a bad word since. The convoluted dynamic is such that all players -- the government, the media moguls, the columnists, even elements of the state -- appear to be tainted by the manipulating, benefiting, and fingerpointing. While the coercive dynamic is not unique to domain of media, and sometimes reflects traditional Turkish power relations of patronage, heightened fears of expanding AKP influence make this government a particularly ripe target. Whether specific AKP leaders are using (or abusing) their authority to put the squeeze on media freedom remains widely believed but unproven. In any case, there's enough dirt to go around.
END COMMENT.

Visit Ankara's Classified Web Site at
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/ankara/>

WILSON